

**“From a Single Family to a Nation, the Difficult Transition:  
A Report from Jerusalem”  
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Four years ago Missy and I stumbled on a relatively small minyan found just between the German and Greek colonies of Jerusalem. These two neighborhoods were settled by people from their respective countries because Jews with similar countries of origins like to stay together. There is comfort in a shared past and shared customs. This particular minyan we stumbled upon is one of great spirit. The minyan is called *Shira Hadasha*, which means, “a new song.” The singing which came from all quadrants of the room lifted you up and the people in deep prayer could not help but move you, both as a fellow traveler and as a spectator. The experience was so magnificent that every time I have gone back to Israel, I have made it a point to make my way back there and, in fact, I have also brought groups of people to this minyan. I bring people because I want them to feel this and, personally, I need it. However, this time the experience fell short of my expectations - but sometimes that happens. Sometimes our imagination remembers something not quite as it was. Sometimes we inflate, we exaggerate, or we simply grow out of touch with what really happened. Sometimes our mindset was different, generating an experience that cannot be replicated.

However, that was not the case this time. This particular morning, as I entered the building, I noticed things had changed a little. The facility had been redone. I noticed the new sign on the outside but from the outside I could not see that they had redone the praying space. They had transformed this space from a social room to a sanctuary. A significant amount of money had been raised, so they renovated the space. Just as I passed by the guard, a normal although unfortunate necessity of Jewish communal life, I overheard him ask someone behind me, who was arriving with another group, if this group had intended to come in and pray with the members of *Shira Hadasha*. When the leader responded in the affirmative, he was turned away, telling him groups were no longer welcome. You see, the minyan had become so popular that they had placed signs on the seats just to remind visitors that these particular seats were reserved for members. It seems that if there was going to be enough room for members, they would have to turn people away.

The praying was affected. After the service was over, Missy asked me if I felt the difference because she thought something was missing. This time the singing wasn't as powerful, the melodies were a little lackluster and the vibrancy seemed to be diluted. This time there was something missing but as I thought about it I figured it out. What was missing was the variety of Jews who had been welcomed in the past. The praying lacked something. It wasn't the inclusive community it once was. It was missing the breadth of Jews that had been there in the past. It was lacking the colorful rainbow of Jews that once sat in its pews. How could there not be a seat in a synagogue for another Jew who wants to sit side by side with another Jew to pray?

Every time I travel to Israel, I am astounded by the variety of Jews that exist. We come in all shapes and sizes, in every stripe, and in every version. In Israel, there are Jews who never wear a *kippah* working alongside those who do. One Jew at a café has a tattoo on her lower back and is

sitting next to a woman who covers her hair for religious reasons. Two Jews erupt into a discussion on Ben Yehuda Street about the upcoming elections. I sat next to another brother in synagogue on Shabbat morning. He had traveled from the west bank for Shabbat and he had a gun under his tallis. I got into a cab with a completely secular Jew and he was wailing about the monopoly the rabbinate has over so many aspects of society. However, all share one heart and one mind with regards to our survival. I couldn't find a single voice that objected to the war being fought in Gaza. You see, when it comes to existence, we can all get together. So, today I stand before you to tell you that there is so much more that unites us rather than divides us. At the core is a common sense of purpose and a singular drive to survive. Nothing has united the people of Israel more than this singular focus of war in Gaza.

When I left for Israel a few weeks ago, I found that there was much work to do here. *V'asu kulam agudah echad* – we have to generate a common community. (Amidah from the High Holidays) I left feeling discouraged by conversations being held within our community, conversations that pit one group against another. I left feeling discouraged because it seems that we can't find a way to sit around the same table and plot a common strategy for how we are going to bring those Jews from the periphery into the conversation. I was upset because we can't sit at a single table together and talk about how we can foster quality Jewish education for every one who wants it. I left disheartened because there are those who won't answer my calls, or speak of my illegitimacy as a religious leader because I am a Conservative rabbi. To them I say, come sit with me and let's talk. If we could just sit together, we could achieve amazing things.

In this morning's reading, Jacob teaches that we are all different. He goes through a blessing of each of his children, a blessing that is more like a description. The lesson which becomes clear is that each of his children is different. They are going to go out into the world and become the foundation of our people. Some will be lost and some will be found, but each will remain an important, integral part of our nation. Each one is different. No two are alike. Each has value and a contribution to make. The second to last chapter of the book of Genesis has another great death bed scene. This time, Jacob is surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Jacob offers blessings, but they're more than blessings, they're descriptions of his children and grandchildren. They are the father's musing about how he has come to know his children. I dare say each child valued a painful lesson when they thought Joseph was dead. Maybe I'm reading too much into this final goodbye, but I think Jacob, after having thought Joseph was dead, said to himself, "I'm going to take the time to get to know each of my children and grandchildren."

However, that is not the most instructive moment because eventually Jacob does die. At this time the boys have to figure out how they're going to get along without their Dad to negotiate relationships. Understandably, they're panicked, because they had spent their early childhood in conflict. Now, in adulthood, upon finding each other once again, they're repeating the same power struggles. So, the brothers come to Joseph and our Torah tells us: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will perhaps hate us, and will certainly pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." So, they sent a messenger to Joseph, saying, "Your father did command us before he died, saying, 'so shall you say to Joseph, forgive, I beg you now, the trespass of your brothers, and their sin; for they did to you evil.'"

Whether this is a fabrication or Jacob really did leave these instructions, the sentiment is the same. We all have to learn to get along. There are real differences between us, between the secular and the religious, the progressive and the traditional, but we have to learn to sit together and talk. So, the story comes to this dramatic conclusion.

“*Vayeivch Yosef* – And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.” He cried because he saw the fear he had instilled. He saw the pain they caused him and the tears were a release. “And his brothers also went and fell down before his face; and they said, behold, we are your servants. And Joseph said to them, fear not; for am I in the place of God. But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it to good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” **Now therefore do not fear; I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spoke kindly to them.** (Genesis 50:15-21) *Va’yinachem otam vayidaber al libam - he comforted them, and spoke kindly to them.*

Rashi amplifies the point by saying, *d’varim hamikblim al halev*. “He spoke to their hearts. And they were receptive.” We need to speak to each other and we need to be heard by each other.

It is a comment made even more powerful when read on the backdrop of last week’s plea by Judah. Last week when Joseph had scared the daylights out of his brothers, Judah steps forward and begs for a conversation. *Vayomer bi adoni yidaber na avdicha b’auznei adoni*. Then Judah came near to him, and said, Oh my lord, let your servant, I beg you, **speak a word in my lord’s ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant;** for you are as Pharaoh. (Genesis 44:8)

We overcome the fear by talking to each other and by standing together. That is why we got together in solidarity with Israel. We stood together because that is what we have to do in the face of attack. On Thursday, I stood shoulder to shoulder with so many from our congregation, so many from our community, in the cold yet I was warmed and encouraged. I listened to communal leaders speak of solidarity and I was struck by the fact that it takes a war to bring us together.

The unfortunate reality is that we live in a world where people hate Jews. We can’t hate ourselves. The people of Israel now face a crisis. It is an existential crisis of survival. Though there are those who would have us believe it is a crisis of public opinion and it is, that is not my concern today. My concern is continued existence. Rabbi Simon Greenberg once remarked, “No outside force will bring about the demise of our people.” We have a homeland and that homeland is defended by one of the greatest fighting forces ever assembled. I know because I have seen those soldiers’ faces, one of them is my nephew, Alon.”

Our sweet, yet incredibly well-trained Aloni, a sergeant with 16 men under his charge and in his care, was stationed in the North watching the Lebanese border. We spent Shabbat with him. He was given Shabbat off to be with his family from America. One afternoon, I watched as he played cards with my children. I asked him how much longer his service was and he remarked, “Six months.” Then I asked him about the ground attack. To which he said, “That is when Israeli soldiers will be lost.” He was correct – Yousef Moadi 19, Dagan Wartman 32, Nitai Stern 21, Yonatan Netanel 27, Aklexander Mashevsky 21, Roey Rosner 27, were the first to give their lives in defense of our holy people.

One moment, Aloni was laughing about the hand of cards he was dealt, the next, serious about the hand we, as a nation, have been dealt. The Shabbat came to a close and we said goodbye – feeling alright that he was stationed up north because we thought the Lebanese border was safer. Then, hours before we boarded the plane to return home, his father called to let us know he was reassigned to Gaza. The hate is all around us, it's in the north and it's in the south. Unfortunately, the reality is that we live in a world where people hate Jews. We can't hate ourselves. This past Sunday morning, my prayers at the Kotel began with my family, and then emerged into a plea for our people and soldiers who defend our holy land. We are one people, we are one family, and sometimes it's hard to get along with our own family, but it's all we have.

Today, I began with a relatively silly story about finding a place to pray and feeling welcomed. I spoke about how the feelings in a room can and do change the quality of what is happening in that room. I sat down in a service a few weeks ago and felt like an outsider, something so foreign to me, something so alien to me that I began to imagine how many may feel as they sit among us. So, today I conclude with one little exercise. In these dark times as we feel the frailty of life, as our brothers and sisters sit in bomb shelters and crouch in foxholes, let us hold on to each other a little tighter. As we sit side by side, here in the West, with our hearts in the Middle East, let us learn to value each other. Make sure the person sitting next to you knows you care about them. We can begin to repair the divide right here and right now. At some point, over the next thirty minutes, make sure the person next to you knows they are welcome to sit next you every week. Make sure they know there is always a place here for them. I certainly want you here.